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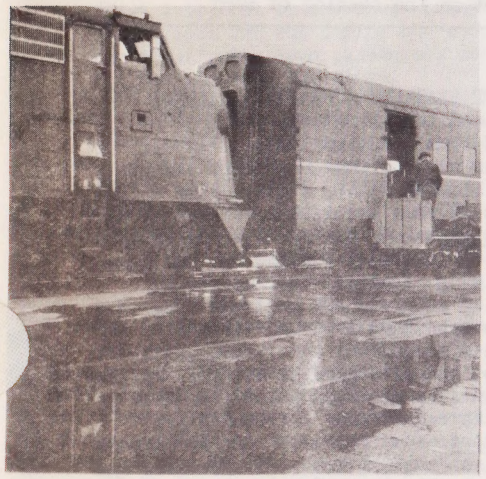
RAIL TRAVEL newsletter

Vol. 1 No. 26
December 20, 1971



Amtrak in stereo

To view the above scene in three dimensions, look at a distant object; then, holding the page so the bottom edges of the photos are level with the ground, bring the page before your eyes at normal viewing distance, while still staring into the distance. You will see three pictures, the middle one of which consists of the two photos overlapping. It should fuse into a single 3-dimensional picture. With practice, you can make it fuse quickly. Bright light on the photos helps.

ON THE COVER: If you're not crosseyed by now, thanks to our surprise holiday cover, let us tell you what it was you were--hopefully--seeing in the richness of three dimensions. The subject itself is a surprise--a Northern Pacific railway post office car, no. 427 in two-tone green, running on Southern Pacific rails under the aegis of Amtrak. The car was substituting for the regular baggage car on the CITY OF SAN FRANCISCO on Dec. 10. Seen here after its 70min-late arrival at Oakland. The puddle of recent rain provides reflections that take on another ghostly dimension in 3-D, seeming to extend below the ground surface.

THIS HOLIDAY issue of RTN is 12 pages long. Next issue we will be back to the normal 16 pages, and Paul Rayton will return with a report on the pre-Amtrak B&O CAPITOL LIMITED. Over the holidays our Richard Tower is circling the nation on Amtrak to furnish us with some firsthand reports.

EARLY IN 1972 look for RTN's annual review of the past year, with the second annual chronology of railroad events. And stay tuned to RTN in the coming months for a firsthand report on the opening of BART.

LETTERS

To add to your catalog of COAST STARLIGHT/DAYLIGHT horrors: Coming south from Portland Nov. 27, I decided to pay some attention to how badly the STARLIGHT was becoming unhinged from its timetable, and the scenario went like this: Out of Portland, 11mins late; out of Salem, 17mins late; out of Eugene, 25mins late; out of Klamath Falls, 29mins late; out of Dunsmuir, 36mins late; out of Davis, 70mins late; into Oakland, 74mins late. Sometimes the absolute necessity of this kind of thing escapes me.

David Carter

Chico, Calif.

READER QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES—excerpts from letters received to date:

You're doing an impressive job, and gaining a noticeably firmer grip on it with each issue. Since my own subscription started in August, both the format and the contents of RTN have undergone strong improvement (doing without "Captain Amtrack" does not cause me sleepless nights), and I welcome the increasingly thoughtful and literate quality of how you say what you do say. Your plainest assets lie in performing a set of functions no other publication in the field does perform, and many of these functions hang crucially on the frequency of your publication and the currency of the news you print. For this reason, I would encourage you to stay with the policy of mailing first class. ... Having read quite a few articles of the kind Paul Rayton writes, I find it an enormous relief to read his: A good, sane, balanced bunch of perceptions, an engaging prose. The supplies of data that pp. 4-6 in no. 22, for example, or p. 6 in no. 24, represent are important to include. All in all, your newsletter's a joy. Keep it up.

***

This is in the nature of a fan letter—to let you know that from my own biased viewpoint you are the only medium that has come to me that

continued on page 11

Rail Travel Newsletter, Vol 1, No 26, December 20, 1971. Published twice monthly, on the 1st and 3rd Mondays, by Message Media, Box 9007, Berkeley, Calif. 94709. Subscription $4.00 a year; 25¢ a copy.

STAFF

James Russell, Editor

Steve Farrar, East Coast Representative
Richard Tower, Research Editor
Paul Rayton, Editor-at-Large
Michael Cohen, Artist

AUTO-TRAIN'S FIRST RUN

by Steve Farrar & Jim Russell

As scheduled, the first Auto-Train left Lorton, Virginia, on Dec. 6 for the run south to Sanford, Florida. Departure was only 7 minutes late and arrival was 8 minutes early, a commendable performance for a brand new operation.

The consist of the first train was two U36B engines, 5 auto-rack cars, 3 full-length dome cars (similar to the Santa Fe dome pictured in our last issue), kitchen car, buffet car, 4 Union Pacific sleepers, and a streamlined steam generator car. Except for the UP sleepers, which were still in yellow paint, the train was done up in Auto-Train's flashy colors—white sides, red lettering, and purple underbody and trucks.

Aboard the train, 150 passengers and 25 cars made the overnight ride. When full-scale operations get underway, the train will have a capacity of 400 passengers and 100 cars. There were some minor inconveniences on the first trip, but on the whole things went smoothly. Reportedly, beer and soft drinks ran out during the evening, and there was insufficient milk for breakfast. Some passengers complained of difficulty sleeping under all the glass of the domes.

The uncompleted Lorton terminal, 20 miles south of Washington, consisted of a red-and-white circus tent. An RF&P locomotive provided light to load the autos. On the preceding weekend, Auto-Train personnel practiced the loading procedure and were able to fill one rack car in less than a minute and a half. Because the station is not ready, passengers had to walk over a gravel path and board through one vestibule. But few complaints were voiced. The excitement of the new service seemed to outweigh the few initial inconveniences.

At the Sanford terminal, a yellow-and-white circus tent had been erected. Greeting the train as it arrived were several hundred persons. The Auto-Train has been running as an extra, and observers in Richmond, Virginia, report the northbound train has been passing as much as an hour early. (On the first northbound run, however, the train reached Lorton 45 minutes late, delayed by a freight.)

The Auto-Train venture has all the earmarkings of success. About 85 percent of the reservations made to date are for roundtrips, and the average reservation is for 3.5 persons. Business Week estimates that Auto-Train can take over 7% of the potential roundtrip auto traffic on its route the first year, and could thus gross $10 million annually. The train was sold out early through the end of January, many days in February and March are booked solid, and reservations have been taken for the coming Easter school vacation and for next winter. One stockbroker estimates that dividends for next year will run $1.20-1.50 per share.

auto-train

The Auto-Train Corp. has entered into preliminary negotiations on a second, Cincinnati-Florida, route, and is considering Chicago-Denver as another possibility. The problem with expanding the service is that there is no more used equipment available, so new railroad cars, at about $750,000 per car, would be needed.

A company spokesman told the L.A. Times that another possible future route is Seattle to Los Angeles or San Diego. A Southern Pacific spokesman immediately threw cold water on the idea, with the claim that East Coast traffic is different from that in the West, where executives hop quickly from city to city. But Joseph Vranich of NARP thought differently: "Washington is extremely enthusiastic about this train, but the West Coast—with all the cars out there—should go crazy over it. If it isn't a huge market, I don't know what is."

Meanwhile, travelers are flocking to the train in such numbers that no advertising beyond the first newspaper ad was needed. Maybe the keen interest is because (to quote Vranich) "The Auto-Train people have thought totally of the passengers."

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(From Amtrak's press release of December 9:)

New York: A completely new line of uniforms--combining the rich history of the railroads with today's modern styling--was unveiled today for passenger train employees by Amtrak...

In a special preview at New York's Pennsylvania Station, models displayed the uniforms that will appear in the next few months on Amtrak trains and stations across the nation. These uniforms are the result of months of planning and thousands of suggestions, including those from the people who will wear them.

"This is the first time an entire industry has been changed so completely in appearance," said Roger Lewis, Amtrak President. "We are presenting a creative yet functional new look to show the nation that a new era in passenger railroading is opening. From red cap to conductor, from ticket seller to trainman, there will be a new image on Amtrak trains and in Amtrak stations."

The uniforms shown today will appear by Jan. 15 on Amtrak trains (on the East Coast)... By May 1, 13 categories of uniformed employees across the nation will be clad in the new designs.

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One is a conventional car with a completely renovated interior, with new designs in upholstery, carpeting, lounge areas, and—a first on Amtrak trains--a new color TV/motion picture system for more comfortable en route viewing. This is the first of 190 such cars to be completely remodeled in the next few months.

Similar cars will be ready next week, and the first will be assigned to the "Florida Special" trains...

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SUNSET LIMITED'S ON-TIME PERFORMANCE

The table below shows the schedule-keeping of Amtrak train no. 2, the L.A.-New Orleans SUNSET LIMITED, during the months of October and November, as tallied at San Antonio, Texas. They do not indicate the degree of lateness at the end-point of the run.

mins late	number
on time	2
16-30	4
31-45	3
46-60	3
61-75	3
76-90	1
106-120	2
121-135	2
166-180	1
181-210	3
240-	2

Of the total of 26 trains eastbound thru San Antonio under the tri-weekly schedule, only two arrivals were on time. These occasions were on Nov. 23 and 28, when the train was 5 mins late and 10 mins early respectively.

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East Coast Report by Steve Farrar

SAMPLE CONSISTS in the East: Southern Railway #5 (PIEDMONT) at Charlottesville Dec. 4 had 4 F units, SR sleeper deadheading, SR heavyweight mail-storage (Boston-Atlanta), PRR heavyweight mail-storage (NY-Atlanta), SR heavyweight working mail-baggage, a stainless steel grill-lounge coach, 2 stainless steel coaches, 10 piggyback flats of mail. Train was on time and carried 16 passengers.

SR #7, same day and place, had 3 GP40s, one F unit, heavyweight SR gray coach, 42 piggyback flats, and caboose. Pigs contained mostly mail for Atlanta, Knoxville, New Orleans, etc. Coach runs DC-Greensboro but handles passengers only to Lynchburg. Two passengers, 30mins late.

RF&P/Amtrak Football Special, Richmond-DC Dec. 5: 2 RF&P blue and gray E units, 6 stainless steel RF&P coaches, one RF&P blue & gray coach, MTHS "baggage-buffet" combine in N&W red, 2 stainless and 3 blue and gray coaches, RF&P office car ONE in olive drab. Over 600 passengers.

SCL/Amtrak southbound SILVER STAR at Richmond Dec. 12: 3 SCL black & yellow E units, 3 PRR red heavywt. mail-storage cars from New Haven, Boston & NY and all bound for Jacksonville, baggage-dormitory, 3 coaches, tavern-observation, diner, sleeper, all stainless steel and running NY-Miami, SCL sleeper and RF&P coach, both NY-St. Petersburg, SCL olive drab office car SAVANNAH added at Richmond. Well-patronized, 30mins late.

DECEMBER OFFICIAL GUIDE shows Amtrak equipment listings, and Boston-Chicago thru train, both missing from the Amtrak Nov. 14 timetable. The Guide also says non-reserved coaches are to begin running on the re-scheduled SILVER STAR between NY & Jacksonville Dec. 17, which should stimulate short-haul travel somewhat on this train. Presently a passenger going only from Alexandria to Baltimore pays the same $2.50 seat reservation charge as the Miami-NY traveler does.

ROCK ISLAND has been pushing a grass-roots campaign on behalf of its two ROCKETS. News conferences with chambers of commerce; at town meetings; and the organization of "Ride the Rocket" committees are part of the plan. At the Peoria Chamber of Commerce, RI's director of passenger services pointed out that ridership in the first half of 1971 declined 27% from 1970. In Ottawa, Illinois, a local businessman's efforts have resulted in marquees, motel and gas stations displaying "Ride the Rocket" signs.....NARP wrote to the Virginia Div. of State Planning and Community Affairs about commuter service, specifically about the feasibility of running 8 commuter trains each way between D.C. and Woodbridge, VA, six of which would continue to Quantico. The Division's reply was unenthusiastic, questioning the ability of RF&P's double- and triple-track CTC main line to handle the trains. Why, that many trains have been discontinued already—and were routinely handled in the past all the way between Washington and Richmond..... GEORGE WASHINGTON continues to run late almost daily because of a 30-mph general slow order from Kankakee to Louisville and 40mph from Indianapolis to Cincinnati on PC. A recent rider from Chicago to NY reported that PC delivered the train about one hour late at Cincinnati, but that C&O made up the time by Charlottesville.....SCL is printing a regional timetable effective Dec. 17. Neither SCL nor RF&P published a Nov. 14 schedule.....CANADIAN NATIONAL fall-winter timetable lists no equipment at all.....METROLINER patronage in October was up 30% over October 1970.....PANAMA LIMITED, on a sample day in November, had 16 sleeper and 35 coach riders out of New Orleans, compared to a typical 20 passengers on CITY OF NEW ORLEANS.....Rescheduled WEST VIRGINIANS experienced big increase Nov. 14, but all east of Cumberland.

AMTRAK "WRITING OFF" THE CHRISTMAS TRAVEL SEASON?

Thousands of unanswered telegrams from ticket agents requesting reservations on Amtrak trains were piled up this month at the new Chicago central reservations center, reports the Chicago Sun-Times. No one knows how many potential train travelers would be turned away this holiday season because of shortages of equipment, bugs in Amtrak's new computerized system, and a number of other reasons.

An Amtrak official was quoted as saying "If we can just get by the holiday rush, I think we'll be all right. We'll have a chance to get organized and, when the summer rush gets here, we'll show people what we can do."

Holiday travelers were finding trains sold out and waiting lists lengthening. Since Amtrak owns only 1247 railroad cars, and many of them have been found unusable (and Amtrak has as yet no repair shop contract), the corporation has found it necessary to borrow extra cars from six railroads and three eastern mass transit districts. In addition, the shuffling of equipment around the country is not yet completed, so Amtrak in many cases does not have the advertised equipment on some trains.

Reportedly there is resistance from some oldtime railroad employees who find it difficult to adapt to the airline-like reservation procedures Amtrak is trying to initiate. But the computerized system has also been at fault. For one thing, the demands made on the computer (housed in Princeton, N.J.) were underestimated, resulting in delays. Besides that, new personnel unfamiliar with railroads are having problems adjusting. Those responsible for the computer facilities said that their problems would be cleared up in January, after the holiday rush. But as of December the computer system was assigning passengers to wrong cars and non-existent trains in some cases.

In Chicago, 10,000 calls are pouring in daily for train reservations. Despite the modern computer system, these calls must be handled by an antiquated switchboard that is inadequate for the purpose. An automatic call-distributing system will take six months to install after it is ordered. However, it has not yet been ordered.

Observers in Los Angeles Dec. 18 watched the EL CAPITAN unload its capacity crowd of 400 passengers and wondered aloud how many others had been turned away. The FLORIDA SPECIAL, beginning operations Dec. 17, is already sold out for most of the Christmas season. The heavy demand for rail service, which Amtrak cannot cope with at this time, is problematic for both pro-train and anti-train people. No one knows how much potential revenue Amtrak is losing by turning away passengers at a time when the Congress is looking closely at Amtrak's finances. At the same time, those who are claiming that "nobody rides trains these days" must be having difficulty reconciling their claims with the facts of consumer demand.

CREDIT CARDS TO BE USED BY AMTRAK

American Express credit cards are usable at some Amtrak offices, effective Dec. 16. Master Charge cards will also be honored. By the end of March, reports the Wall Street Journal, all "key locations" will accept the cards. As of now, only a few dozen offices are using the cards. Only two railroads had yet distributed the charge forms to their offices. An advertising campaign scheduled for Jan. 10 will announce used of the cards in some locations. American Express cards cannot yet be used aboard trains to charge food--only at ticket offices. Amtrak expects a big rush of card usage and is delaying the official announcement until it is better able to cope with the demand.

COMMUTING AND RAPID TRANSIT

(Look for changes in this department in the next issue)

Senator Urges Rail Commuter Fare Assurances from Amtrak

Senator Clifford P. Case, ranking Republican on the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee (which has jurisdiction over funding of Amtrak), wrote to Amtrak President Roger Lewis Dec. 15, asking his corporation to give commuters long-term assurances that Amtrak will continue to accept commuter tickets and maintain commuter fares on its trains between New Jersey, New York, and Philadelphia.

The 200-series trains, over which there is a court battle to decide whether they are commuter trains or should be permanently controlled by Amtrak, carry more than 50,000 riders a week in New Jersey suburban service. At present, Amtrak accepts commuter tickets on its non-Metroliner intercity trains. But there is concern as to whether Amtrak will continue this policy, and whether it will keep fares at their present level.

Case asked Lewis to issue a policy statement promptly so that commuters could plan ahead for the time when the court case is settled.

He also requested Amtrak to fill in a 2½-3hr gap in train service to New Jersey on weekday evenings. The New Jersey Dept. of Transportation is also concerned with the gap, and plans to meet with Amtrak about it.

MARYLAND COMMUTER TRAINS DOOMED?

Unless outside funding appears, commuter train service in Maryland will disappear. This was the conclusion of Carl Englund, Jr., a DOT consultant. The B&O and Penn Central are both taking heavy losses on their commuter trains, which now carry about 1200 people daily between Washington and the Baltimore, Gaithersburg, Rockville and Silver Spring area.

The solution proposed by NARP, summarized in this column in the last issue, seems to be mired down in a bureaucratic tangle. A Maryland DOT official explained that since there is no state agency concerned with railroads, it is difficult to plan for them. However, nothing in state law prohibits Maryland from doing so.

NARP's Joseph Vranich commented that "A lot of people won't do anything until the B&O ... asks for discontinuance (of the trains). Then our phones ring off the hook asking us to fight it in court. That's too late."

NARP's proposal would not conflict with the transit system being built in Washington. Said Vranich: "Admittedly, this commuter rail proposal is not overly glamorous. The vehicles are not capsules gliding along at 300 miles per hour in a tube. There is no spectacular gimmick or slick attention-getting device here. This conventional commuter train system does only one thing--it works."

PHILADELPHIA'S LINDENWOLD LINE MAKES NEWS

Philadelphia's sleek, automated Philadelphia-Lindenwold, N.J. commuter line, running since 1969, carries 35,000 riders daily at speeds up to 75 mph. However, many more commuters still drive their cars into Philadelphia, and the construction of two bridges linking New Jersey and Pennsylvania, required by legislative mandate, is eating up funds that the Delaware River Port Authority, operators of the transit line, need to meet current deficits. The Authority is seeking solutions to its financial woes, but one such, raising bridge fares, is strongly opposed by automobile organizations.

A BART DEDICATION TRAIN RUNS

The Bay Area Rapid Transit District moved its head offices from San Francisco to Oakland Dec. 16, and with the accompanying ceremonies ran a 5-car prototype train full of dignitaries around Oakland, hitting nearly the top 80-mph speed at one point.

TRAINS IN THE MEDIA

It is a curious season. While railroad people are making noises about how the trains are dead, are like stagecoaches, that nobody rides them, that nobody wants to ride them longer than four hours, stories are appearing in national magazines completely opposite in outlook to these doomsday statements.

Holiday Magazine, in its December issue (see QUOTES, p. 10) carries an article titled "Amtraking on the T-train" by Garret Kyne. It features full-color photographs of the Turbo Train on its nationwide tour last August, including a large one of what is probably Mount Shasta with the red, white and black Turbo in the foreground.

It is really satisfying to see stories of this nature again appearing in the media. In glowing terms the article paints the train picture as very much alive, under Amtrak, with the Turbo as the point of takeoff. There is a bit of exaggeration, but that's probably allright if it whets public appetite for train travel.

A similar article appears in the Winter issue of the revived Saturday Evening Post. This one, by Paul J. Hendrickson, is simply titled "Amtrak", and features a color painting of the Turbo and a map of the Amtrak system. The long article is a sort of capsule history of railroading in America, and like the Holiday article it tells us that train travel is definitely coming back. It is liberally sprinkled with quotations from Amtrak officials and others. With a little less hyperbole than Kyne's story, it also stimulates the desire to go train riding.

The future would appear to be looking much better when articles of this kind appear prominently in national magazines (the Holiday article is the lead feature article of the issue). We look forward to more of the kind in the coming months, and expect to see changing public opinion accompanying them, and increasing ridership of passenger trains.

EDITORIAL

PASSENGER TRAINS: RUN 'EM AND RUIN 'EM

We'd like to end the year with a tribute to the Southern Pacific Transportation Company. As others have observed, they certainly deserve plaudits for being the most knowledgeable and efficient railroad men around. When they ran passenger trains, they did it with great aplomb and knowhow. And when they made the decision to run the trains into the ground, they did it with equal efficiency and zest. It's doubtful whether any other railroad could exercise such skill and devotion to ridding itself of what it deemed an unwanted burden.

The trouble with this is that times have changed, and railroad men sometimes are not noted for their modernity. Now the call is for corporations to be socially relevant. It is no longer enough to just have a black-ink budget. There is a search for new ways of measuring corporate success, that include the social good that one has performed. Such good is difficult or impossible to express in dollar terms, but forward-looking businessmen are struggling to find some indicators of their concern for things broader than profits. The Wall Street Journal has been running a long series of searching articles on this topic, but one suspects that their ideas will be lost on Southern Pacific. When the new tally system comes forth, it's hard to see how SP will fare. In creating ill will among the public, it may have created more ill will for businessmen everywhere, and they can hardly be thankful to SP for that.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK ***

"The current lackluster financial performance of the Coast Daylight reflects 15 years of Southern Pacific efforts to downgrade service and discourage patronage; a virtual absence of Amtrak promotional effort; and under Espee operational control, a very poor on-time performance record since inception of Amtrak operations..."

—Anthony Haswell in letter to S.F. Examiner, December 19

"Congress must provide further funding to keep up the Amtrak experiment —but at the same time it would do well to consider establishing more rigid operating requirements designed to force participating railroads to give passenger trains priority over freight trains and to insure that the train-riding public will get clean, comfortable, on-time rides."

—Oakland Tribune editorial, December 20

"In addition to dependability, there is also the distinct advantage railroads have always held: the opportunities for sightseeing. The psychological mood of the country in wanting to slow down—evidenced in such ideas as the four-day work week—will doubtless be a boon to all modes of travel in the years ahead, but the railroads may well come off best."

—Garret Kyne in Holiday Magazine, December

"You look at the highways and they're overcrowded, and you look at the airways and they're overcrowded, but the railways are already existing and they are our best hope for efficient and clean mass transportation. There's no doubt about it. Beefing up train travel is the greatest transportation challenge we face today."

—Amtrak's Harold Graham, quoted in Saturday Evening Post, Winter 1971

"People just don't want to ride a train for over four hours."

—W. Graham Claytor Jr., president of Southern Railway, quoted in L.A. Times, December 13

"Southern and Amtrak take you through 19 scenic states via Transcontinental Sleeper from Boston to Los Angeles ... 3,645 marvelous sightseeing miles!"

—From a current Southern Railway timetable

"If Amtrak is still losing sizable amounts of money on this run (Buffalo-Cleveland-Chicago), it is Amtrak's own fault. The route has enormous potential. The combined population of major metropolitan centers between Buffalo and Chicago is over 11.2 million people. If intercity rail passenger service can't succeed there, it can't succeed anywhere. Amtrak's proposal to discontinue these trains is contrary to the congressional mandate that it provide passenger service that is truly responsive to need and market potential."

—Anthony Haswell, December 10 press release

continued from page 2

speaks to the human condition in the muddled travel picture.

I belong to NARP, subscribe to Railroad and Trains, and others, for one reason only: because I am interested in the railroads as passenger carriers, and hopefully with me as one of the passengers.

***

I feel that overall RTN is doing a good job.

It should continue to come first class, as it contains time value material. ...

I miss Captain Amtrack, but do understand your problems.

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I would like to see feature articles on progressive rail service, such as BART and other modern systems in the U.S. and abroad, not on outdated "pre-Amtrak" trains. In other words, more on urban rapid transit.

***

Keep up your excellent job. You have the finest newsletter in the U.S.—by far. Continue sending it first class. Will gladly pay any increase needed.

***

I consider the main function of a newsletter to be the quick spreading of current news, so I feel that if extra cost for first class mail is needed, then I am willing to pay it. Let me say that I enjoy your coverage of the rail passenger area.

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(The overwhelming consensus of readers who have replied is that RTN should continue to travel by first class mail.)

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